

# God has written his law on our hearts. Here's how we follow it

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## BeyondWords

*This is the second part of a series on the true nature of human liberty, according to the teaching of Pope Leo XIII. The first part dealt with natural liberty. This second part treats of moral liberty.*

([LifeSiteNews](#)) -- [In the previous article](#) we saw that human beings have the power to freely to choose their own actions. This is called *natural liberty*.



We also saw that this natural liberty can be used to pursue moral evil.

When we use our natural liberty to choose evil, we against our own nature as rational creatures. We have been astray by something outside ourselves, and therefore we cannot be said to be truly free. Indeed, Our Lord Jesus

Christ said “Whosoever committeth sin is the slave of sin.” (Jn 8:34)

The man who is enslaved by sin lacks *moral liberty*.

In his great encyclical letter “On Human Liberty,” Pope Leo XIII warns that:

Such... being the condition of human liberty, it necessarily stands in need of light and strength to direct its actions to good and to restrain them from evil. Without this, the freedom of our will would be our ruin.

Where does this light and strength come from?

The Holy Father answers as follows:

First of all, there must be law; that is, a fixed rule of teaching what is to be done and what is to be left undone.

This kind of law can only apply to rational creatures, for the reasons outlined in the [previous article](#). The Supreme Pontiff explains:

This rule cannot affect the lower animals in any true sense, since they act of necessity, following their natural instinct, and cannot of themselves act in any other way. On the other hand, as was said above, he who is free can either act or not act, can do this or do that, as he pleases, because his judgment precedes his choice.

Therefore, a law must exist which can be rationally apprehended by human beings. By this law we will know how to act and how not to act. For rational animals, following our instincts and feelings is not enough to live a truly free life.

For a man's actions to be morally good, they must follow judgments that are in accordance with reason. And man must not only judge what is good, he must also judge how that end may be attained in a reasonable way. As the pope explains:

[H]is judgment not only decides what is right or wrong of its own nature, but also what is practically good and therefore to be chosen, and what is practically evil and therefore to be avoided.

In other words, the reason prescribes to the will what it should seek after or shun, in order to the eventual attainment of man's last end, for the sake of which all his actions ought to be performed.

As rational animals, we can only attain our final end if we act in accordance with reason. This prescription of reason therefore has the nature of law. As Leo XIII teaches:

This ordination of reason is called law. In man's free will, therefore, or in the moral necessity of our voluntary acts being in accordance with reason, lies the very root of the necessity of law.

It should be clear from this, that the moral law cannot in any way hinder human freedom. Rather, by following the law of reason we live in a way which is truly free, because it is truly in accordance with our nature. The moral law directs our actions towards their final end – happiness – and away from that which would be destructive to us.

In the absence of this law of reason, we would choose things that would lead to our own destruction. Hence, the Supreme Pontiff states:

Nothing more foolish can be uttered or conceived than the notion that, because man is free by nature, he is therefore exempt from law. Were this the case, it would follow that to become free we must be deprived of reason; whereas the truth is that we are bound to submit to law precisely because we are free by our very nature. For, law is the guide of man's actions; it turns him toward good by its rewards, and deters him from evil by its punishments.

Having established that man must follow the law of reason in order to be free, the question necessarily arises: how do we know what this law dictates?

The answer is startling and reflects the splendour and glory of our human nature and of our Creator.

We can know this law, and we can follow it, because God has written it on our hearts.

## **The natural law**

St. Paul teaches:

For when the Gentiles, who have not the law, do by nature those things that are of the law; these having not the law are a law to themselves: Who shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness to them, and their thoughts between themselves accusing, or also defending one another. (Rm 2:14-15)

God is the creator of all things, and He directs all things to their final end, by His divine providence. The law by which all created things are directed is called the *eternal law*.

Every single thing that exists, whether it be a non-living object, a plant, an animal, or a human being, is subject to the eternal law and is moved by divine providence.

The eternal law moves all the inanimate things of creation, in accordance with the nature given to them. Non-sentient living things, like plants and fungi, are moved in accordance with the life principle, or soul, which they possess. And

non-rational sentient animals are also moved, as we have said in the previous article, by their instincts and sensory powers.

The eternal law of God likewise directs human beings towards their proper end. Human beings however, being rational, must be directed by God in a way which is proper to our rational faculties.

God has therefore imprinted his eternal law on our rational souls. We call this imprinting, *the natural law*.

Pope Leo XIII explains that this “natural law,” which is “written and engraved in the mind of every man,” is “nothing but our reason, commanding us to do right and forbidding sin.”

It is because this *engraving* is the work of God, that it has the force of law. Leo XIII teaches:

[A]ll prescriptions of human reason can have force of law only inasmuch as they are the voice and the interpreters of some higher power on which our reason and liberty necessarily depend.

The natural law is binding on man because, while imprinted on his own nature and found within himself, it has its origin in God who is Creator and Ruler of the world.

But in what does this “engraving” or “imprinting” consist?

## The first principles of reason



As I have explained elsewhere, the human soul is created without any existing sensory or intellectual knowledge. All our knowledge is derived from data acquired by the use of our senses. The human intellect then abstracts from sense knowledge to arrive at intellectual knowledge.

The first ideas formed by the human intellect by abstraction are the result of intuition, not of reasoning. The first principles which form the basis of all further reasoning are, according to St. Thomas Aquinas, “naturally known without any investigation on the part of reason.”

From these first principles the intellect can then attain further knowledge by the use of reason. Therefore, while we are not created with the *knowledge* of these first principles, we are born with the *disposition* that our intellect will “see” them when it receives sense data. St. Thomas refers to these dispositions as *natural habits*.

A good example of such a first principle is “the whole is greater than its parts.” The human intellect doesn’t need to work out by discursive reasoning that, for example, a pizza cut into slices is larger than one of its slices considered separately. It knows, by intuition, that this is the case. A developing child “sees” that it is so, without having to *reason* about it.

The human intellect has a *speculative* and a *practical* aspect. The speculative intellect “directs what it apprehends, not to operation, but to the consideration of truth,” while the practical intellect “directs what it apprehends to operation.” The intellect is naturally habituated to “see” certain first principles.

The first principles of human reason regarding practical action are known as *synderesis*, from a Greek word which has a similar meaning to our word conscience.

St. Thomas writes:

Wherefore the first practical principles, bestowed on us by nature... belong... to a special natural habit, which we call ‘synderesis.’

Whence ‘synderesis’ is said to incite to good, and to murmur at evil, inasmuch as through first principles we proceed to discover, and judge of what we have discovered. It is therefore clear that ‘synderesis’ is not a power, but a natural habit.

“The first principle of practical reason,” says St. Thomas Aquinas, “is one founded on the notion of good, viz. that ‘good is that which all things seek after.’ Hence this is the first precept of law, that ‘good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided.’”

He continues:

All other precepts of the natural law are based upon this: so that whatever the practical reason naturally apprehends

as man's good (or evil) belongs to the precepts of the natural law as something to be done or avoided.

Therefore, when we say that the natural law is "written on our hearts," we mean that we were created with a *natural habit* that directs our practical action in accordance with reason.

## Conscience

The first principles of practical reason are of our judgements as to how our practical intellect judges we are to act. The judgement of the practical intellect as to whether an act is morally good, or morally bad, is called *conscience*.

Conscience is the application of moral principles to a particular case. Conscience tells us that we must perform, or must omit, certain acts because the order of reason obliges us. We are bound to act in accordance with reason, therefore we are bound to follow our conscience.

Conscience is not a feeling, or an instinct, and certainly not a person deciding for himself what he wants to do, but rather a judgement of reason. Judgments of conscience may however be accompanied by feelings, such as guilt or a feeling of peace. These feelings arise from the considerations of the intellect, they accompany conscience, and support it, but they should not be confused with conscience itself.

St. Thomas writes:

Conscience is said to witness, to bind, or incite, and also to accuse, torment, or rebuke. And all these follow the application of knowledge or science to what we do.

He continues:

[This] application is made in three ways.

First:

[I]n so far as we recognize that we have done or not done something; 'Thy conscience knoweth that thou hast often spoken evil of others' (Ecclesiastes 7:23), and according to this, conscience is said to witness.

Second:

In another way, so far as through the conscience we judge that something should be done or not done; and in this sense, conscience is said to incite or to bind.

Third:

In the third way, so far as by conscience we judge that something done is well done or ill done, and in this sense conscience is said to excuse, accuse, or torment.

He concludes:

Now, it is clear that all these things follow the actual application of knowledge to what we do. Wherefore, properly speaking, conscience denominates an act.

An excellent summary of the doctrine of conscience explained above is found in *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*, by John Henry Newman.

Cardinal Newman writes:

I say, then, that the Supreme Being is of a certain character, which, expressed in human language, we call ethical.

He has the attributes of justice, truth, wisdom, sanctity, benevolence and mercy, as eternal characteristics in His nature, the very Law of His being, identical with Himself; and next, when He became Creator, He implanted this Law, which is Himself, in the intelligence of all His rational creatures.

The Divine Law, then, is the rule of ethical truth, the standard of right and wrong, a sovereign, irreversible, absolute authority in the presence of men and Angels.

‘The eternal law,’ says St. Augustine, ‘is the Divine Reason or Will of God, commanding the observance, forbidding the disturbance, of the natural order of things.’

‘The natural law,’ says St. Thomas, ‘is an impression of the Divine Light in us, a participation of the eternal law in the rational creature.’

This law, as apprehended in the minds of individual men, is called ‘conscience;’ and though it may suffer refraction in passing into the intellectual medium of each, it is not therefore so affected as to lose its character of being the Divine Law, but still has, as such, the prerogative of commanding obedience.

‘The Divine Law,’ says Cardinal Gousset, ‘is the supreme rule of actions; our thoughts, desires, words, acts, all that man is, is subject to the domain of the law of God; and this law is the rule of our conduct by means of our conscience. Hence it is never lawful to go against our conscience.’

We attain *moral liberty* by following the *law of reason*, which is made known to us by our *conscience*.

God has written the law of reason into our very being. But we fallen creatures, afflicted by the consequences of original sin, find it difficult to judge, and act, correctly.

That is why God has come to our help, with further aids and assistance, in addition to the internal law that he has engraved on our souls.



It is to these aids which we will turn in the next part of this series.

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